Interview of the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar with C. Holland Taylor, CEO of LibForAll Foundation

Extremism is Alien to Islam

BY ALAA AMER
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Al-Azhar University is an extremely important institution. Everyone who cares about Islam, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, comes to al-Azhar to obtain clarification regarding various important concepts within the teaching of Islam, or to request the support of this vital institution.

In the context of fulfilling such needs, His Excellency the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Dr. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi answered various questions posed by C. Holland Taylor, the CEO of LibForAll Foundation, a nongovernmental organization which cares deeply about Islam and Muslims. The foundation strives to express, clarify and widely disseminate a true understanding of Islam not only to non-Muslims, but also to Muslims in general. LibForAll aims to present the moderate and tolerant face of Islam, and explain the importance of [Muslims] returning to the essence of Islamic teachings which, until now, have been poorly understood by many groups [both in Islam and the West].

When asked his opinion about the actions of Muslims that violate the teachings of Islam, the Grand Shaykh replied that this constitutes a gross error which stems from Muslims' own lack of knowledge and understanding of Islam, and the importance of good acts in keeping with its teachings. In fact, within Islam, good acts [towards others] are no less important than the act of worshipping God Himself.

The Grand Shaykh also explained that Islam absolutely does not compel one to engage in “extreme behavior” (tasyaddud), either through thought or the observance of religious [a true understanding of] Islam compels Muslims to behave in a mutually supportive and tolerant manner towards those with different beliefs, and not to disturb the religion or beliefs of others. In the opinion of the Grand Shaykh, this is because “Islam provides freedom to everyone to follow whatever religion they choose, without compulsion.”
In regards to the Islamic concept of “People of the Book,” the Grand Shaykh explained that the people of the book are all those whose faith is based on holy books (*al-Kutub al-Samawiyah*) which were revealed before the Qur’an, such as the Torah and the New Testament. As the Qur’an states: “And do thou not debate with people of the book, except to offer something better to them.” In another verse, the Qur’an emphasizes, “Allah does not forbid you to act kindly and justly towards [the people of the book], as long as they have not expelled you from your homes.” The Grand Shaykh stressed that this verse says that Muslims’ relationship with people of the book must be based on the principle of kindness and mutual assistance, as long as they do not disturb Muslims.

Taylor continued his questioning by asking about the concept of jihad within Islam, especially the inner jihad (*jihad an-nafs*) to overcome [the human impulse towards] immorality and sin.

In connection with the above issue, the Grand Shaykh explained that jihad can only assume the form of war for two causes. First, in order to defend religion, wealth, honor and one’s nation. And second, to defend the persecuted. While the inner jihad, in his opinion, represents the highest and most important form of jihad. Through inner jihad, humans can develop kindness and obedience [to God’s will], while vanquishing corrupt and evil tendencies [within themselves].

In the course of its ongoing programs to promote [a pluralistic and tolerant understanding of] Islam, LibForAll Foundation recorded the interview conducted with the Grand Shaykh and will broadcast [portions thereof] in various television programs in Europe and America.
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